

## **Media's role in bridging gender gap: An analysis**

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**Abstract:** It is disturbing reality that India has not yet managed to eliminate the gender gap despite the strong laws in the constitution to make special provisions for women. Women, who account almost half of the population in India, are equally contributing their efforts in every sphere of life. They have not only proved themselves in political and economic development but also in sports activities. Besides their great contribution, they are not getting equal status in society. Gender gap has always been a matter of debate for a long time in India. They are not even getting equal pay for equal work. Women are contributing more but getting less for their work. Media, considered to be the fourth pillar of democracy, plays a dominant role in making people aware of different issues and happenings in contemporary world. It changes people's mind and makes people aware about pros and cons of every issue. It might also be used as a strong medium of bridging gap between the two genders. It not only highlights the issues but also teaches the ways of solving the problems. Media is a vehicle that can make women able to fight and speak for their rights. It can promote gender awareness among masses. It can encourage, recognise and support women to share their experiences and exchange their views. Besides, its dominant role in today's world, media has some criticisms too. Media is criticized for not highlighting women's issues in a proactive and pragmatic way. Women are still struggling to get proper coverage without any prejudice. This paper analyzes the role played by media in bridging the gap between the two genders.

**Keywords:** Gender Gap, Media's Role, Democracy, Bridge, Awareness

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### **Introduction**

Gender gap, by definition, is a disproportionate difference or disparity between the sexes. It is evident that the gender gap is constructed socially. This socially constructed gender gap seems to be natural in the true sense. This gap is seen in almost all the spheres of life. Although both the sexes have equally shared their efforts in every field, women are still seen as subordinate to men. They are not even allowed to make decisions by their own. The social environment has created women's image as weak, emotional and family oriented. The gender gap starts from the very beginning. When parents encourage school-age children to excel in all subject areas, the school-based gender gap disappears. This gap is mostly reported in the workplace. Both male and female genders differ not only in job opportunities but also in their salaries. Though the constitution guarantees equality for both the sexes and prohibits any discrimination in job opportunities on the grounds of sex, religion, caste and creed. Leaving aside all these legal provisions, women are paid less than men for the same work and men often earn more for the same work than women. The difference that exists between males and females in access to some social goods or benefits, based solely on their difference in gender. The difference is always seemed in favour of men. It is also obvious that gender gap is seen in media organizations too. Women do not get equal salaries for the same work in media organizations as well. They do not hold

key positions or decision making positions in these organizations. The cultural norms are generally imposed on women only. They are barred from working outside. Cultural change is a complex process, and achieving gender balance in organisations requires organisations to change the way they operate, and individuals to change the way they think and behave. One learns from his/her life experiences about the people and ideas imposed. When a person sees a man working outside and woman inside the home then he/she develops this idea in his/her mindset and continue to do so in near future. The societal norms and customs have created different perceptions about what men and women should do and characteristics ascribed to each gender. For example, men are described as more logical, more competitive and better at technical tasks and women as more sensitive, inclusive and nurturing, knowing instinctively how to care for children.

Media plays a vital role in dissemination of information. It does not only inform masses but also changes people's attitude. Media is proved to be the best medium of creating awareness in the society. Media includes mass media like TV, News channels, News papers, Radio, journals, magazines and most importantly internet and email. When voice of deprived section of any society is ignored by the decision makers or policy makers, it is media that takes issues of them. People come to know about any happening in the society by none other than media. In this modern knowledge-

society, media plays the role of facilitator of development, disseminator of information, and being an agent of change. Today, media is considered the fourth pillar of the estate all over the world. More importantly this is very true in the context of a biggest democracy like India. However enormous space is given by our media to business, and very little to social sectors like women's issues, health and education. Most media correspondents attend the film stars, fashion parades, pop music, etc. and very few attend to the lives and problems of workers, farmers, students, sex workers, etc.

### **Gender: A theoretical framework**

The word "gender" was originally a linguistic term referring to a grammatical classification of objects roughly corresponding to the two sexes and sexlessness (as in masculine, feminine, neuter, common). Gender refers to the different sets of social and cultural characteristics that are widely, but falsely, thought to be inherent to each sex as a result of natural or biological reproductive difference. Gender is a social construct created and maintained between men and women, not a fixed quantity that one is born with. The terms masculine and feminine are seen not as belonging to either men or women, but as formed in the relationships between them. The social construction of gender emphasizes the various stereotypical norms dominant in western cultures that prescribe different roles to men and women and, in turn, reinforce the inequalities between them. Women have to lose their opportunity of getting equality in the society because of their gender identity. Women are not only discriminated against on the grounds of their gender in private sphere but also in public sphere. The gender gap exists at every corner of the world. Women generally have low or no access to and control of resources (such as economic, social, cultural and symbolic capital, education, reproductive/other health services). Women, treated as subordinate to men, have to bear multiple burdens as compared to men; whether it is in case of care of the household, children, spouse, the elderly, or be it work outside the home. They also have to bear higher rates of abuse, intimidation, sexual harassment and violence, less power to determine and express sexuality and lower wages. They are not even paid equal pay for equal work. Women regardless of their roles are given agriculture tasks rather than professional tasks because of their gender identity. Regardless of their equal contribution in private or public affairs, women are ignored from being part of decision makers or policy makers.

### **UN Women's Conference at Beijing: A landmark**

The rights, responsibilities and opportunities of individuals should not be determined by the fact of being born male or female. In recognition of the importance of establishing gender equality around the world, the United Nations Development Fund

for Women (UNIFEM) was established as a separate fund within the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) in 1984. The General Assembly instructed it to "ensure women's involvement with mainstream activities." If we date back to the history, the United Nations Platform for Action, adopted at the Beijing Conference in 1995, suggested for expansion of media houses very rapidly. The Beijing Platform for Action adopted in 1995 and the resolution of 2000 on the follow-up to the Beijing Platform had identified women and the media as one of 12 critical areas of concern. The Platform of Action gave the concept of 'gender mainstreaming'. Gender mainstreaming is the application of gender perspectives to all legal and social norms and standards, to all policy development, research, planning, advocacy, development, implementation and monitoring—as a mandate for all member states. It was analyzed and stated in the Beijing Platform for Action that gender stereotyping in advertising and the media is one of the factors of inequality that influences attitudes towards equality between men and women. It emphasized the important role of awareness by media education and responsible guidelines. With the concept of gender mainstreaming, gender factor became a central focus to the practice of development. As a result of the Beijing conference more than 100 countries announced new initiatives to improve the status of women. In 2000, the follow-up Beijing +5 conference further strengthened the application of the mainstreaming concept, and used it to highlight the need for more progress in reaching equality worldwide.

It also suggested that these media industries will be proved as a 'critical area for concern' and that must be urgently tackled if we are to move forward in achieving gender equality. As a part of achieving gender equality through media, two important issues were highlighted in the Platform for Action: Firstly, the focus was given on increasing the access of women to jobs in the media and new technologies – especially at managerial level. Secondly, it emphasized to promote balanced and non-stereotypical portrayal of women in the media. The Platform also made a direct plea to governments and international organisations to promote research into all aspects of women and media, so as to earmark areas for action. The media is seemed to provide an extremely limited range of resources which promote limited and biased conceptualisations of women. Women are often portrayed exclusively as objects of male desire or as mothers. They are assumed to be creatures of lesser intelligence with their interests limited only to the domestic sphere. They are valued largely for their ability to bear children and for a specific type of idealised beauty which, for majority of women around the world, is unattainable. The discrimination does not end here. They even do not get adequate space in the news. Media spaces often

do not include discussions and debates on a wide range of gender related issues (such as sexuality, violence against women, the problems of working mothers and many more) or a wide range of voices, ideas and positions on them.

There is a lack of gender sensitivity in media organizations and media has failed to eliminate gender-based in public and private local, national and international media organizations.

Women's images are projected as negative in media communications - electronic, print, visual and audio that is to be changed. Media has also failed to provide a balanced picture of women's diverse lives and contributions to society in a changing world. Following were the objectives passed in Beijing Platform for Action about women and media.

Strategic objective J. 1. Increase the participation and access of women to expression and decision-making in and through the media and new technologies of communication.

Strategic objective J. 2. Promote a balanced and non-stereotyped portrayal of women in the media.

#### **Criticism over gender biasness in media**

Media's biased role towards women, women's rights or women's movements is always criticised all around the world. Most of the times, media seem to be biased in portraying women's image. Their image is identified as negative in the media content. Media accepts traditional gender stereotypes and sexist stereotypes, and display stereotypical images by not reflecting the changes in men's and women's lives. Stereotypical images of women in media include women as housewives, wife, mothers, housekeepers and consumers. Because of media's biased role in portraying the image of two genders, women who are considered to be weaker section, do not get sufficient opportunities to represent themselves, or to speak out with their own voices in their own interests. According to Markandey Katju, "The media often diverts the attention of the people from the real issues to non issues. The real issues in India are socio-economic, the terrible poverty in which 80% of our people are living, the massive unemployment, the price rise, lack of medical care, education, and backward social practices like honour killing and caste oppression and religious fundamentalism etc. Instead of devoting most of its coverage to these issues the media focuses on non issues like film stars and their lives, fashion parades, pop music, disco dancing, astrology, cricket, reality shows, etc. There can be no objection to the media providing entertainment to the people, provided this is not overdone. But if 90% of its coverage is related to entertainment, and only 10% to the real issues facing the nation (mentioned above) then there is something seriously wrong with the media. The whole question is of proportion. In the Indian media the

sense of proportion has gone crazy. Entertainment got 9 times the coverage that health, education, labour, agriculture and environment together got. Does a hungry or unemployed man want entertainment or food and a job?"

Achieving gender equality, however, is a grindingly slow process, since it challenges one of the most deeply entrenched of all human attitudes. Despite the intense efforts of many agencies and organizations, and numerous inspiring successes, the picture is still disheartening, as it takes far more than changes in law or stated policy to change practices in the home, community and in the decision-making environment. Media texts reinforce stereotypes by repeating them on various occasions, rather than creating and distributing images that might challenge traditional views or that might show the changes that take place in the lives of men and women.

There is no doubt that the media is the best and strong medium in today's world that has power to make change in the society. It has great power to influence society and the potential to challenge sexist and superficial views. However, sexist stereotypes are reproduced through the news, magazine programmes and commentaries in all forms of media. Media is also bound in the patriarchal system. Most of the media organizations are owned by men. Women have either limited or no role in decision making or policy making. What news is to be covered or where particular news is to be placed, these all are decided by male workers. Women are assigned for soft news while men are given hard news to cover. The patriarchal system that controls the production and dissemination of messages and images has an impact on the way women's reality is reflected in the media. Especially print and electronic media are far from providing a balanced picture of women's diverse lives and contributions to society in a changing world. Violent and derogatory media messages negatively affect women and their participation in society. The most optimistic interpretation of today's media might be to say that media images reinforce women's traditional roles rather than provide challenging, encouraging messages by reporting on the changes in women's lives. As a relatively new trend, women are seen as consumers, with ads and commercials targeting women of all ages and socio-economic backgrounds.

#### **Representation of women in media: Adequate?**

Women are often represented as sex objects, beauty agents or fashion icons. They are represented as dependent, with identities that serve to complement the identities of men. Women's identities are described in a language that reflects the male point of view. Most media representations ignore the identity differences between women that stem from differences in economic and socio-cultural backgrounds. The traditional division of labour

between men and women relegates the private sphere to women, while the public sphere is relegated to men. When it comes to dissemination of information about people's interest, media seems to be distinct. Political news, news on the economy, and external affairs are assumed to be of interest to men, while fashion, health and gossip sections are assumed to be of women. According to Panelist and journalist Pamela Philipose, "The report of the Media Studies Group (MSG) shows that only 2.7% women are in media at the district level. The MSG surveyed 255 districts of 28 states in 2012 and obtained information through RTI. The survey across districts found 329 accredited women journalists. Besides, 70% of news came from male sources in the media. That is also a reason why issues of women don't find place in mainstream media."

### **Conclusion**

Media's role, being in favour of men has always been a matter of criticism. Because of increasing TRPs, media organizations do not give adequate coverage to weaker sections of the society. For bridging gender gap in the society media has to represent women in a proper and balanced way. There is a need for more media space for developments related to women. For example, it is generally known that women are the group most severely affected by poverty. It would be appropriated for the news, current affairs and economy pages of newspapers to include articles and news on this topic. News items about women complaining of high prices or women describing their holiday shopping strategies are not sufficient.

Media has an obligation to ensure equal voices to women and men. Media should also give special emphasis in increasing women workers in the media. They should be assigned same task as men do. They should not be discriminated in employment, wages or salaries. This is important not only for democracy, pluralism and social justice but also for a reflection of women's reality and points of view in the media. However, just increasing the numbers of female journalists may not be sufficient in itself to change the sexist quality of news stories. Gender awareness at all levels in media activities would ensure better media practices. Most importantly, media should adopt non-sexist language and remove the masculine tone of news reporting. As a requirement of positive discrimination, journalists should be in contact with women's organisations and groups, making a habit of going to them to find the news, instead of waiting for news to arrive. Gender awareness at all levels in media activities would ensure better media practices. Gender sensitive non-stereotypical understanding in media and its reflection will be a result of interaction with the audience, media professionals, nongovernmental organisations, the private sector, and government departments. Media have the potential to make a contribution to the advancement of women. The production and dissemination of either negative or degrading images of women in electronic, print, audiovisual media has to be changed. Media should give priority to the display of diverse and non-stereotyped women and to their reality that is different than that of men.

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